THE BOYS ARE BACK ON VINYL

NICK KENT wangles a trip to Gay Paree for an earful of the new THIN LIZZY album 'Black Rose'. Here's his report from the aural frontier.

Who're those blokes with Nick Kent . . .? L-R: Gorham, Kent, Lynott, Moore, Downey. Pic: CHALKIE DAVIES

EVER HEARD the one about the bloke trying to write a feature on a group lead by a black Irishman? The joke has no punch-line, because more often than not, trying to produce a strong perceptive article on Thin Lizzy is a frustrating, sometimes pretty much pointless task.

Not that that should generally — or genuinely — be the case mind you. Lizzy have been in the rock writers' thumbs-up list ever since 'The Boys Are Back In Town' and the excellent 'Jailbreak' suddenly unveiled on we jaded, elitist buggers the true clout of a band previously bucked and spurned for their work and image by the press.

Three years back and things suddenly changed, jettisoned primarily by said single and album, both great '70s clsssics and as relevant to 'Anarchy In The UK', as 'C'Mon Everybody' in terms of the sheer epic joyous rock action hyperdrive.

Since then the flood-gates have opened and the band have been regularly courted by the media through three subsequent albums, gargantuan bouts of touring and even a recent line-up change.

Features, however, have tended to fall into categories, centering their substance (or lack of same) around Phil Lynott's loquacious manner, his 'Jack The Lad' modern Don Juan predilictions and the generally held fact that he's an all-round sort. Results, with the marked exception of Chris Salewicz's excellent in-depth study of Lynott some 18 months back, covering four pages of his very paper, have all too often been genial, insubstantial, cocky, facile, pointless.

Not that Lizzy themselves don't help these tedius enterprises. They (and/or their managers) are well into sending reporters out into foreign parts for a good story. America has seen more than a few OK rock journalists on the gravy train with the band, for example — but again often to little avail with the old Lizzy stereotypes, with everything from Lynott's gift of the gab to former Lizzy guitarist Brian Robertson's volatile nature in action dutifully wrung out.

My shot at the Lizzy story caused the PRs and managers on the case to do the whole all - expenses - paid number and fly me to Paris where the band were at the point of finishing up recording and mixing the forthcoming 'Black Rose' album. The very fact that 'Rose' was the first TL studio album to be worked up in some 18 months, since the release of 'Bad Reputation', was cause enough for a check-out, not to mention the addition to the ranks of Gary Moore replacing Brian Robertson making for added human interest material.

Unfortunately circumstances — principally timing, and the ever-beckoning finger of Parisian night life pleasure-seeking — caused my two-day sojourn with the band to be something of a failed mission in terms that have arguably as much to do with my own lack of discipline in such contexts as anything else.

Throughout the weekend stay, the band were extremely affable, readily forthcoming — but somehow circumstances conspired to avoid granting a good context for the soul-searching rap/interview that I was after.

Instead I elected to observe what is in effect a new group, clocking the individuals and the human chemistry at work. It needed no penetrating intelect to grant me proof positive of a much-improved constructively amenable, four-sided relationship currently at work.

Lynott himself is in fact in a state of well-founded elation at this current set-up and doesn't hedge on the issue of Brian Robertson's departure.

"It had simply reached the point where 'Robbo' was more trouble than he was worth. It was even down to him refusing to listen to play-backs of his solos, he'd become so arrogant about his worth. That, plus the fact that there was always this tension, this really grim weight of concern around the time we were about to set out on a real important tour — the American tour for example — just praying that he'd be in control enough not to end up doing something stupid like smash his hand up in some dumb fight down at the Speakeasy.

"In fact, you asked me earlier whether Lizzy, in their pre-'Jailbreak' days, ever reached a point where we seriously felt like knocking it on the head an' all. Well not really — and certainly not in the sense that I later experienced when Robbo broke his hand just before a US tour and I really felt . . . Christ, well what's the point. That was far closer to the bone."

SO . . . NO amicable break-up stories fronting the 'unofficial' truth, although no grudges appear to remain and the old corporate still see each other socially.

In Robertson's place Gary Moore comes as a definite plus to the enterprise. A former rough-houser, a nasty scar permanently embellishing his lower cheek and tapering off close to the chin stands out as a livid reminder of his days as the feisty young guitar hero with Skid Row and mid-period Lizzy. The forces of temperance and discipline, however, have caused the guitarist to drop all immature cockiness of yore and, as well as, improving his playing no end, Moore provides a sturdy, reliable quarter for the others to work off.

As for the others; Gorham, despite having the kind of brazen, all too obvious, good looks that instinctively make one suspicious of him and ready to down right dislike him, disarms those preconceptions almost instantaneously by being a regular, personable soul, and a good drinking partner with his candid reminiscenes of the Old Los Angeles days when his desire for getting high got all too close to him becoming nailed to a junkies' existance, built on four years of pretty solid abuse involving narcotics and barbiturates "until I realized that I was getting too damn close and had to clean my act pretty damn quick."

Brian Downey, drummer from the outset, isn't often regarded as an 'arbiter' of good copy by the media which is stupid considering he's no dullard and has been the backbone of Thin Lizzy since the very beginning. Downey spent the previous year checking his proverbial bearings, a task that involved dropping out of one American tour due to a firm desire to sit this one out and gather his resources for the pacing involved in this year's onslaught.

AND THEN of course there is Lynott, a perfect Flann O'Brien rock'n'roll character (were O'Brien to have penned his marvellous works in a contemporary context), a disarmingly generous, big-hearted, sly, powerful personality whose current elation revolves around the fact that he firmly believes that his band, in the context of hard rock and heavy metal, have no real rivals either here or in the U.S. and that 1979 will find the Lizzies playing Joshuah to U.S. mass acceptability's Wall of Jericho.

A new deal with Warner Bros — 'Live And Dangerous' was the first work released under the terms of the deal — augurs well for this detente, and all hopes are pinned on 'Black Rose' to provide the dynamite with a solid, assidiously planned assault of the Americas (*not* the recently completed tour of the South supporting Nazareth which was chosen (a) to acquaint themselves to Southern audiences hitherto unaware of Lizzy, and (b) as a warm-up shot for the up-coming European gambit shortly to be commenced.)

It was when I returned from Paris all too aware that I'd failed to glean enough grist to flesh out a piece, that I instigated a second encounter session with the band, and Lynott in particular — at this point attending to the final details of the mix and track running order with a bearded, austerely professional Tony Visconti at Good Earth Studios.

And here, unfortunately, comes the rub, because now I'm able to hear the finished product pumping out of the speakers I realise that the work is *not* the masterpiece Lynott believes it to be.

In fact, after numerous plays, I can only conclude that 'Black Rose' is nothing more than another 'Thin Lizzy album', certainly no greater than 'Johnny The Fox' or 'Bad Rep', and depressingly bereft of anything that can lift it above the gash and thunder that will always make Lizzy a worthwhile band to check out.

No, 'Black Rose' is eminently listenable to those already enamoured with the enterprise, but it fails to break any new ground. The 18-month sabbatical has provided nothing more than a new variation on the same damn themes.

Thus 'Do Anything You Wanna' boasts great Gary Glitter type drums impeccably recorded, but the song structure itself is nothing new, and the lyrics nothing to write home about. Similarly 'Got To Give It Up', 'Toughest Street In Town', 'Get Out Of Here' and the single 'Waiting For An Alibi' serve up lusty, fist-fuck tight rock action but little to provide firm proof of new directions.

Only two numbers deviate particularly from the norm. The first is a ballad, 'My Sarah', the second, the album's touted piece de resistance, 'Black Rose' itself. 'Sarah', a Moore/Lynott ballad, is destined to be an enormous AM hit in the States, brimming as it does with an exquisite prettiness and a brilliant acoustic /electric blend-in guitar glissando from Moore.

'Black Rose', however, is a touch worrisome. The song itself is Lynott's most full-blown anthem yet to his Irish heritage, replete with amazingly adept guitar run-throughs of 'Danny Boy', 'Go Lassie Go', traditional Scottish jigs and an American folk song tossed in as well (spotlighting the Irish, Scottish, and USA origin of Lizzy's protagonists) and climaxing with a clumsily conceived run down of Ireland's finest, from Yeats, Joyce and Behan to George Best and Van Morrison, concluding not unnaturally with Lynott himself referring to 'Whisky In The Jar' and 'Playboys Of The Western World'.

I have few doubts that 'Black Rose' will be the first album since 'Jailbreak' to receive a real critical drubbing — mainly for the reasons stated above but also because of songs like, say, 'S & M', a well-structured rocker with lyrics meant to parody the whole daft ritual but ending up far too ambiguously and failing to state just exactly what Lynott feels about the subject — choosing to be coy instead of dogmatic.

Talking about the album Lynott maintains his sense of pride and confidence in what he's putting out, but beneath that spirit of quasi-arrogance one comes face to face with a peculiar, somewhat contradictory figure.

Here is a man, after all, whose proudest achievement was to have a book of his lyrics published as a slim volume of poetry, but who adamantly counters — "I long ago gave up trying to be Bob Dylan." More to the point, Lynott himself, I believe, hasn't come to terms with his creative potential as a songwriter — certainly not in terms of the songwriter spotlit in 'Jailbreak'.

The latter album suggested that if Lynott got totally to grips with his muse he could be as forceful, passionate and eloquent as Bruce Springsteen. But whereas Springsteen now writes from the soul, having, with 'Darkness On The Edge Of Town', stripped away all the jive street characters and bogus rock dreams in order to make honest statements, Lynott seems forever locked inside the archetypes he has created — with 'Black Rose' ultimately

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